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(54) **IMAGE-FORMING DEVICE HAVING A BELT
TYPE PROCESSING MEMBER WITH
MICRO-FEATURES**

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(52) U.S. Cl. **355/400; 355/402; 355/406**

(58) Field of Search **355/400-408**

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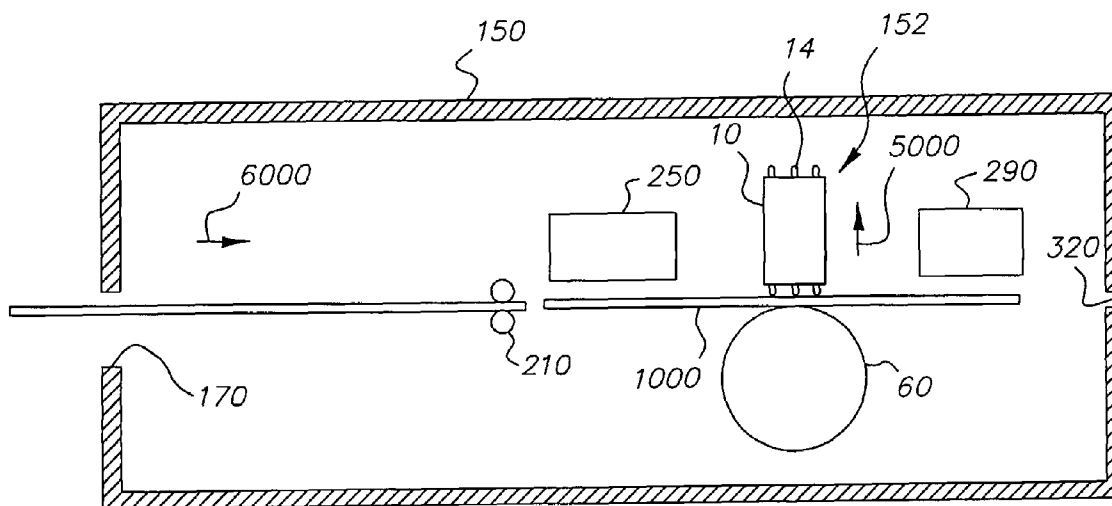
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

An image-forming device comprises a rotating belt that includes a plurality of micro-members. The micro-members are preferably spherical members or hook and loop members. The rotating belt having the micro-members thereon is adapted to contact microencapsulated media with a force sufficient to rupture unhardened microcapsules on the media.

12 Claims, 11 Drawing Sheets



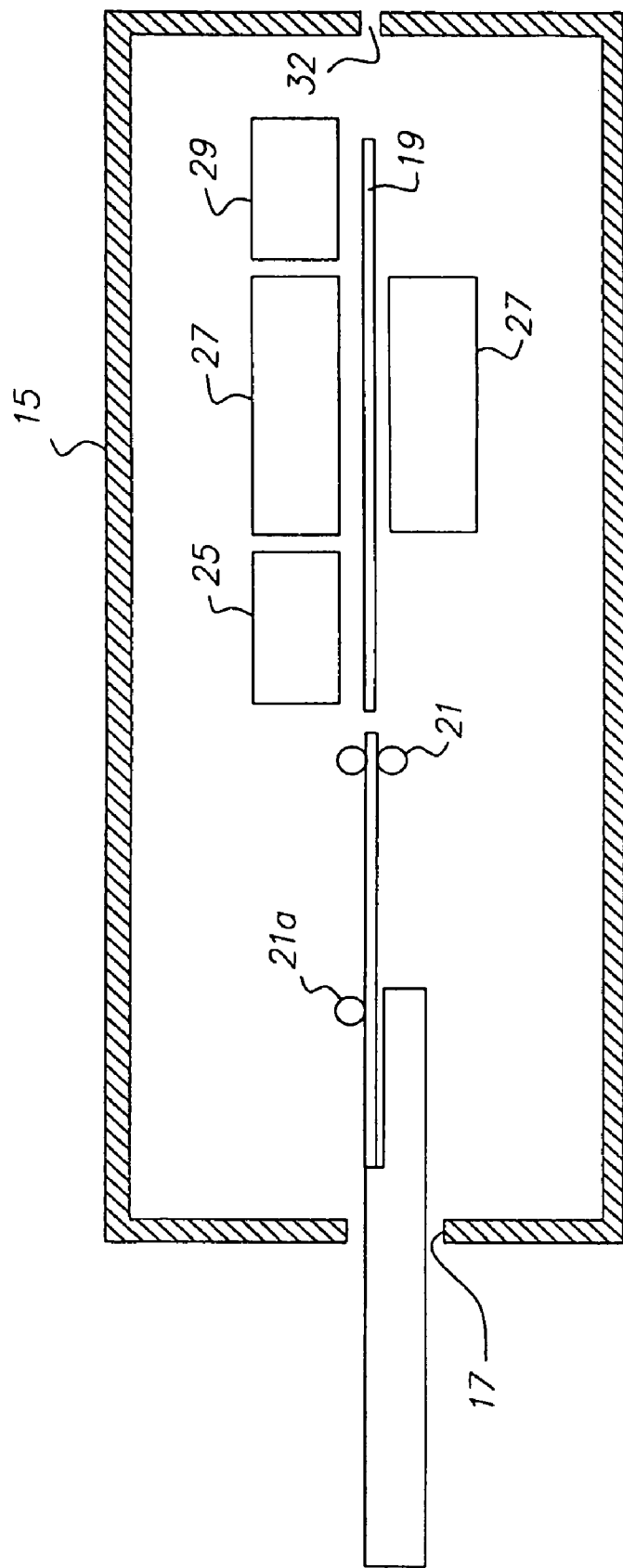


FIG. 1A
(PRIOR ART)

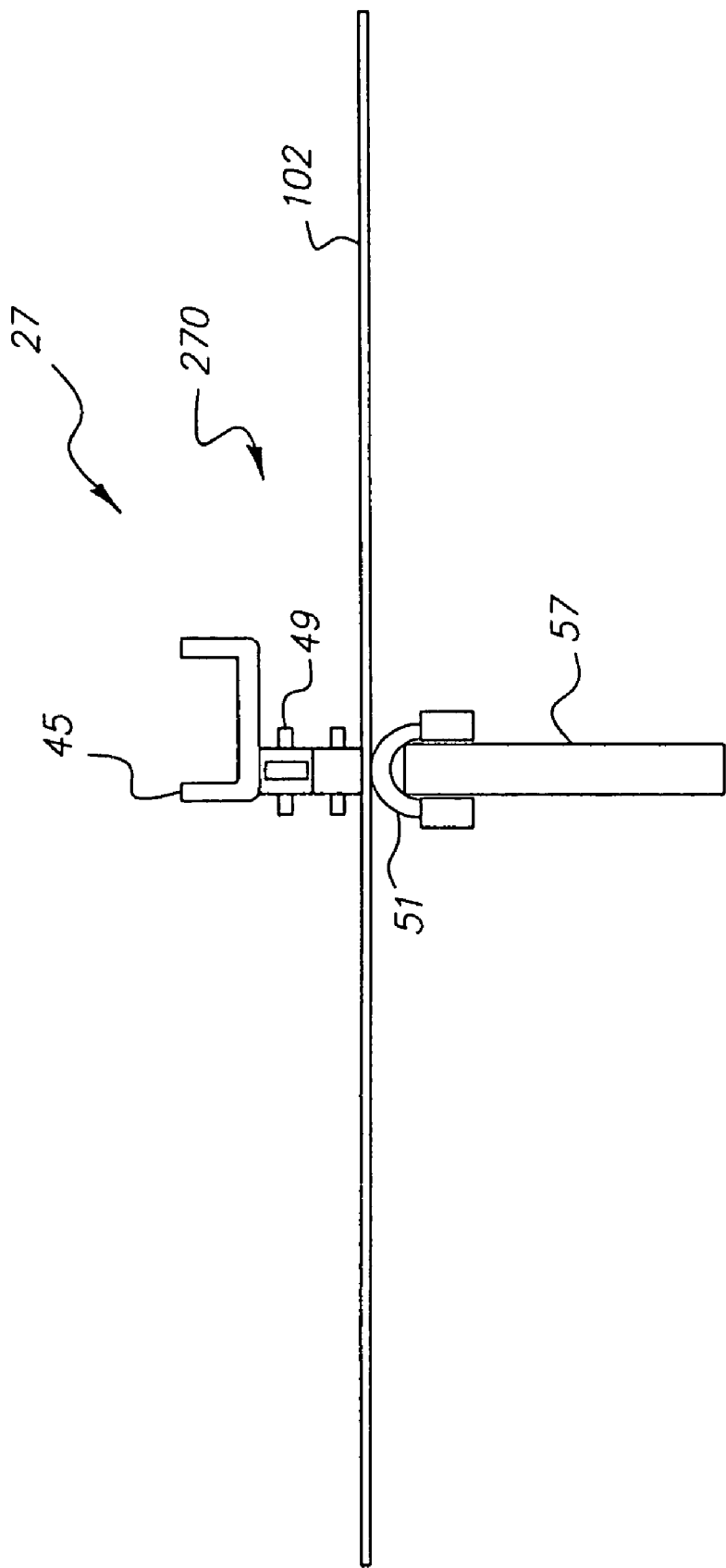


FIG. 1B
(PRIOR ART)

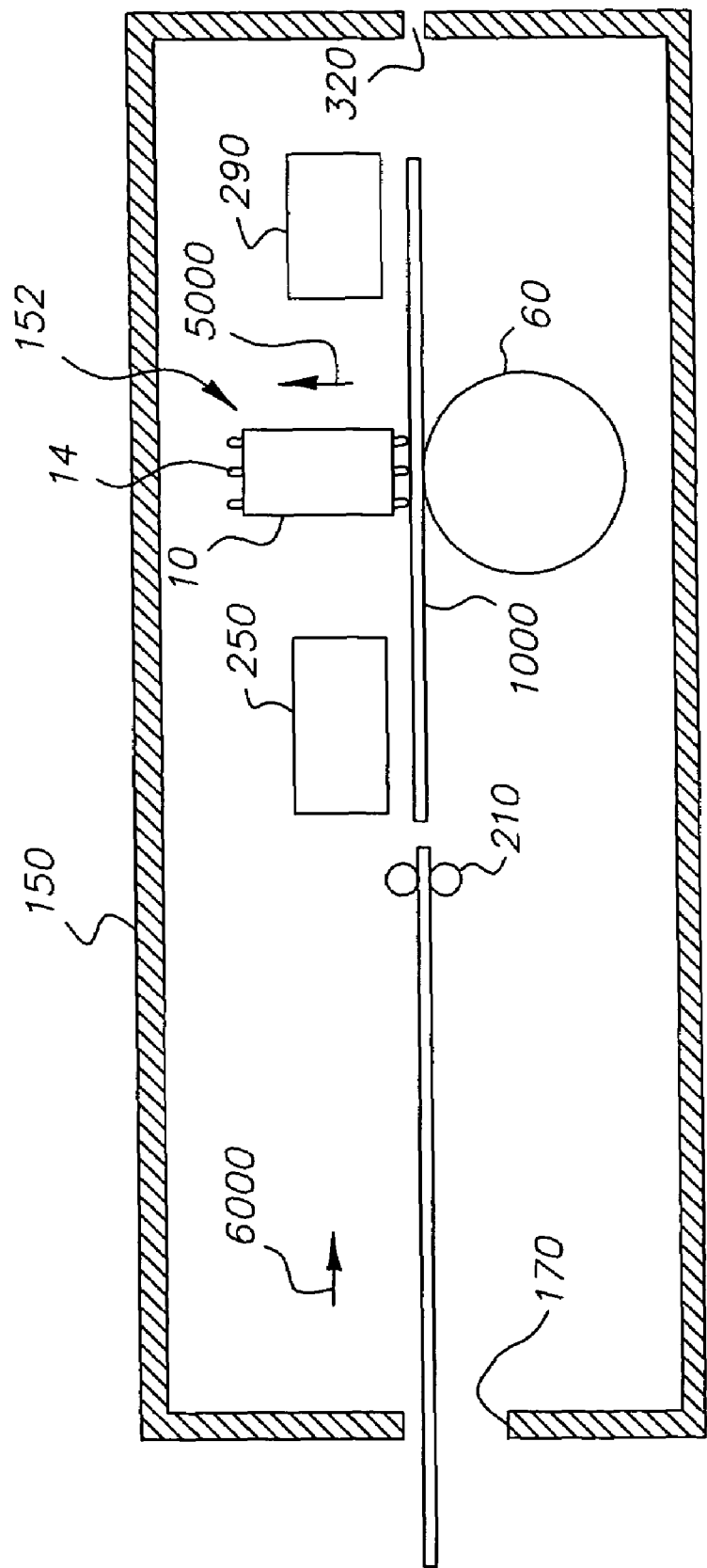


FIG. 2

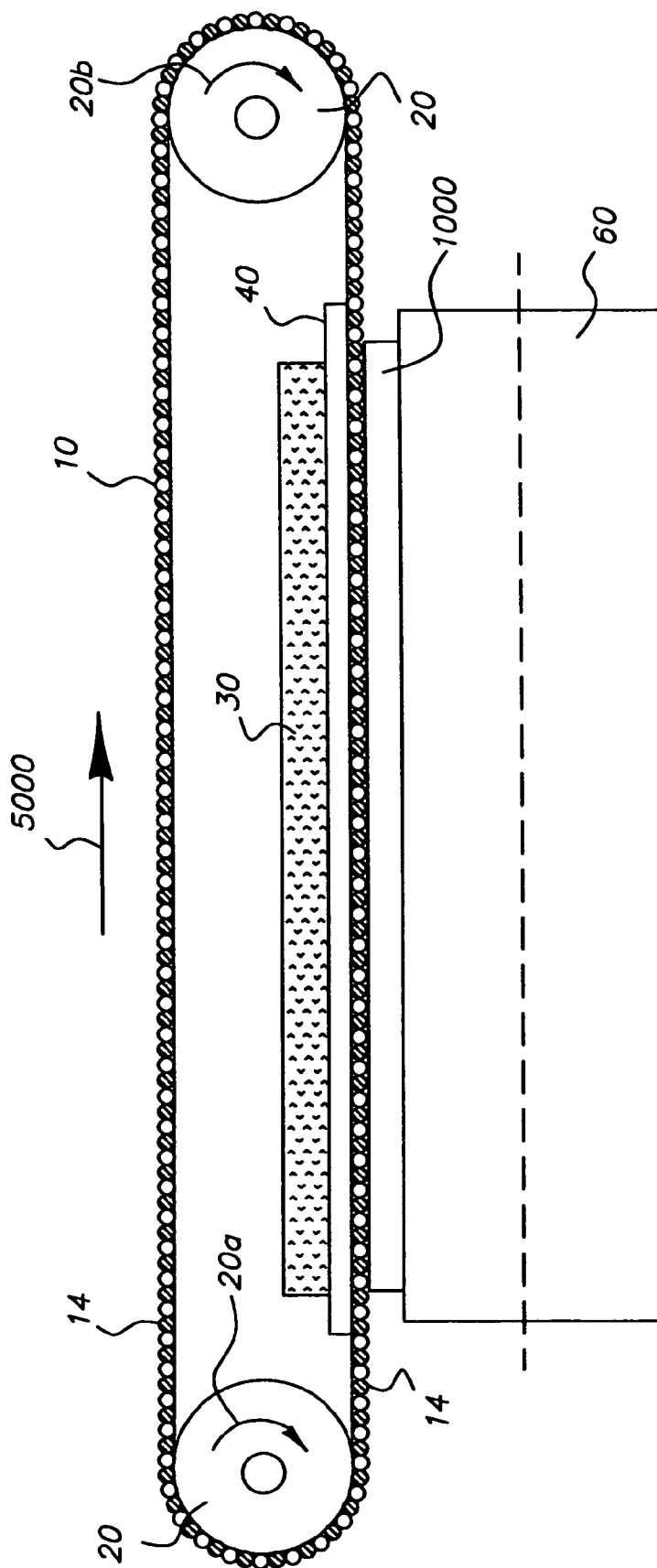


FIG. 3

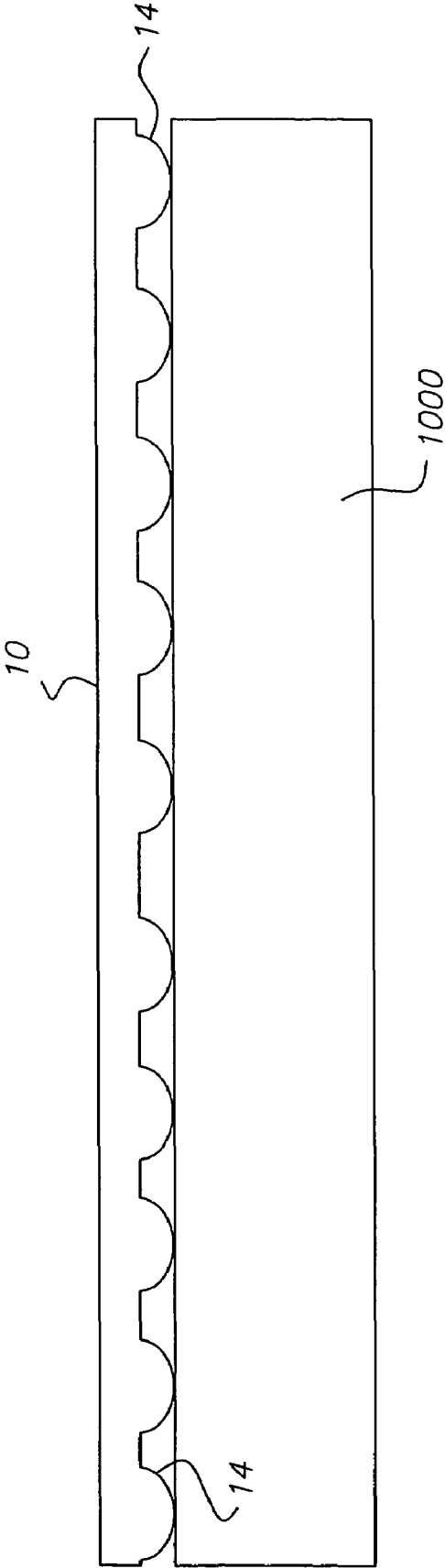


FIG. 4

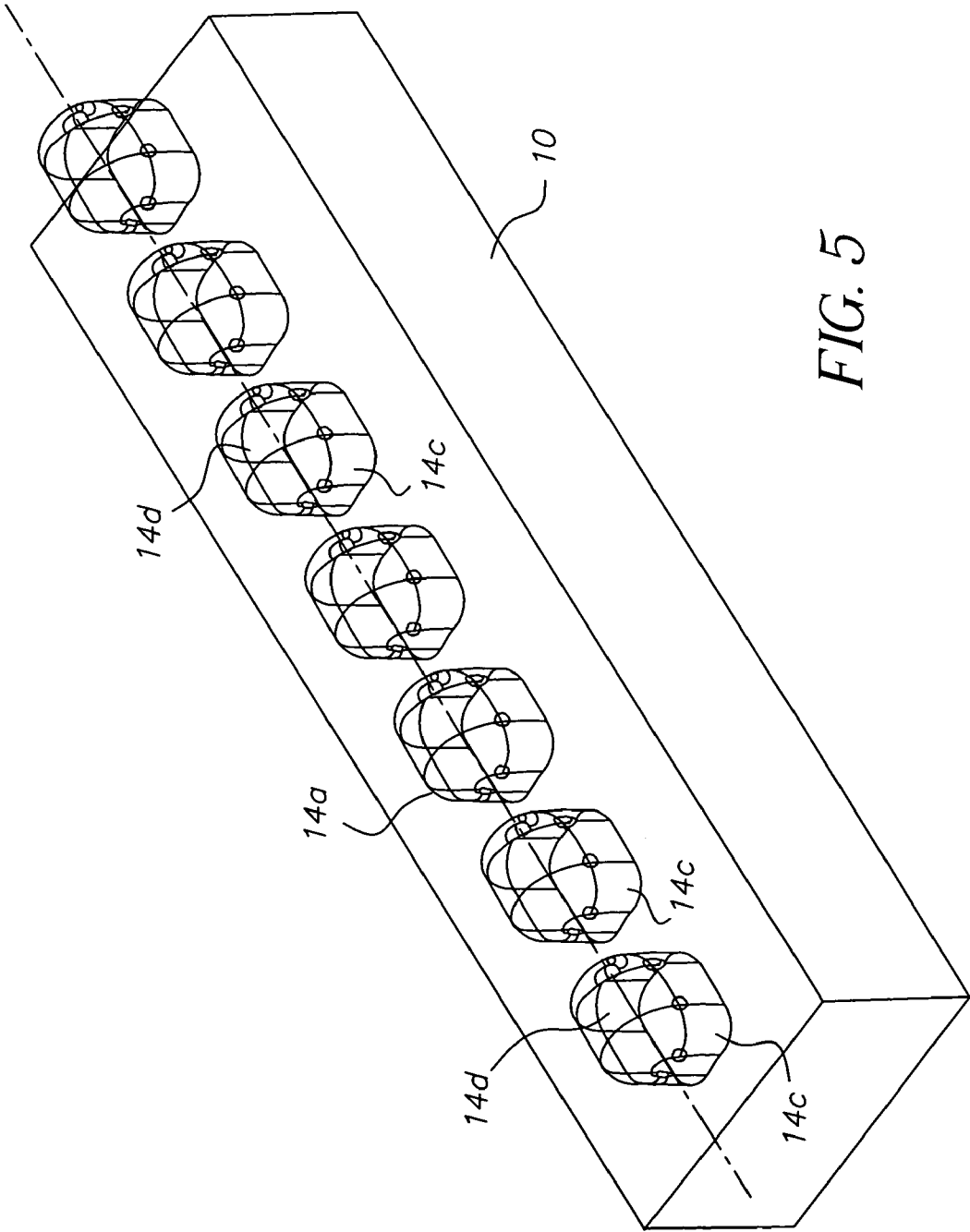
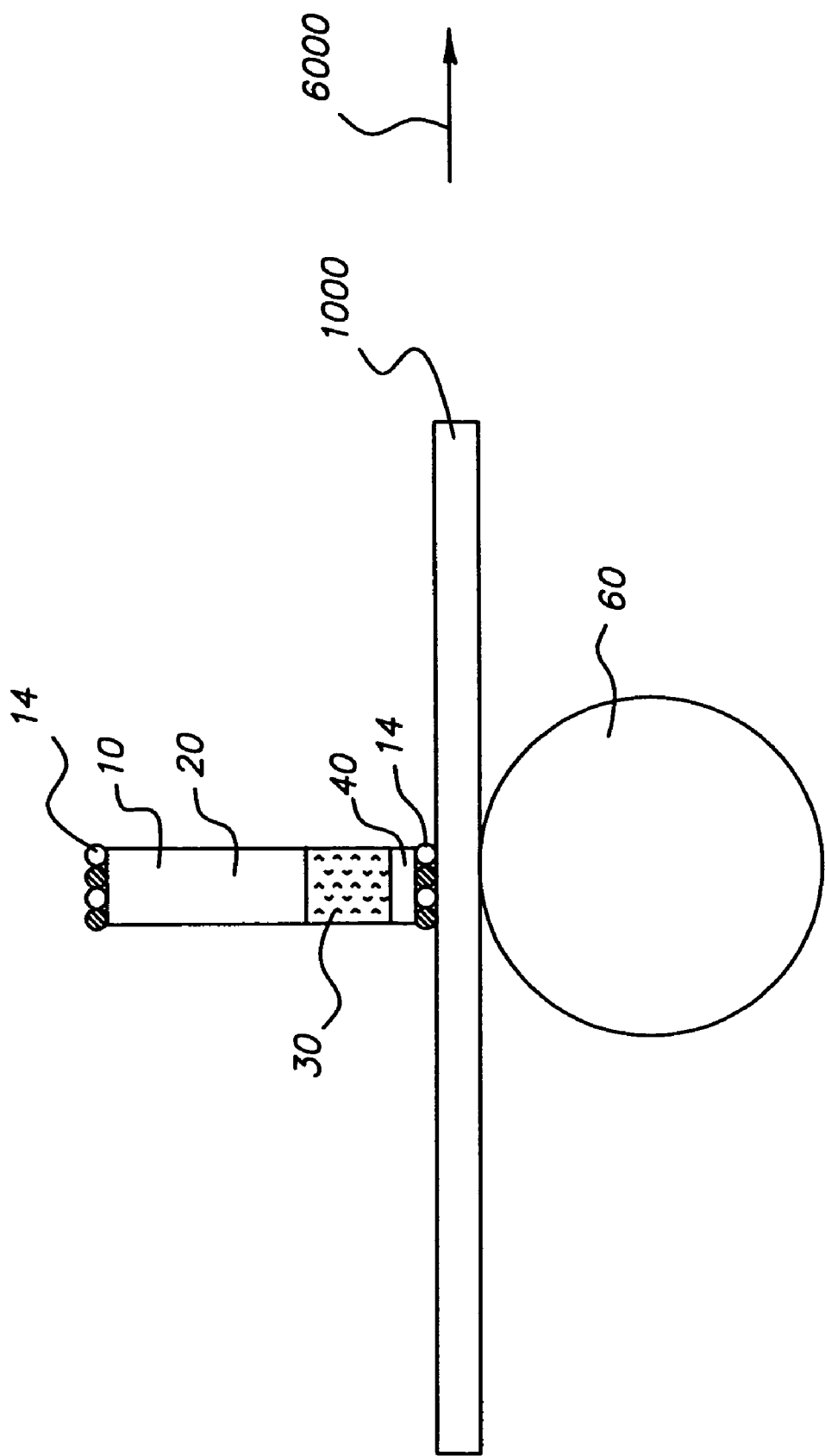


FIG. 5



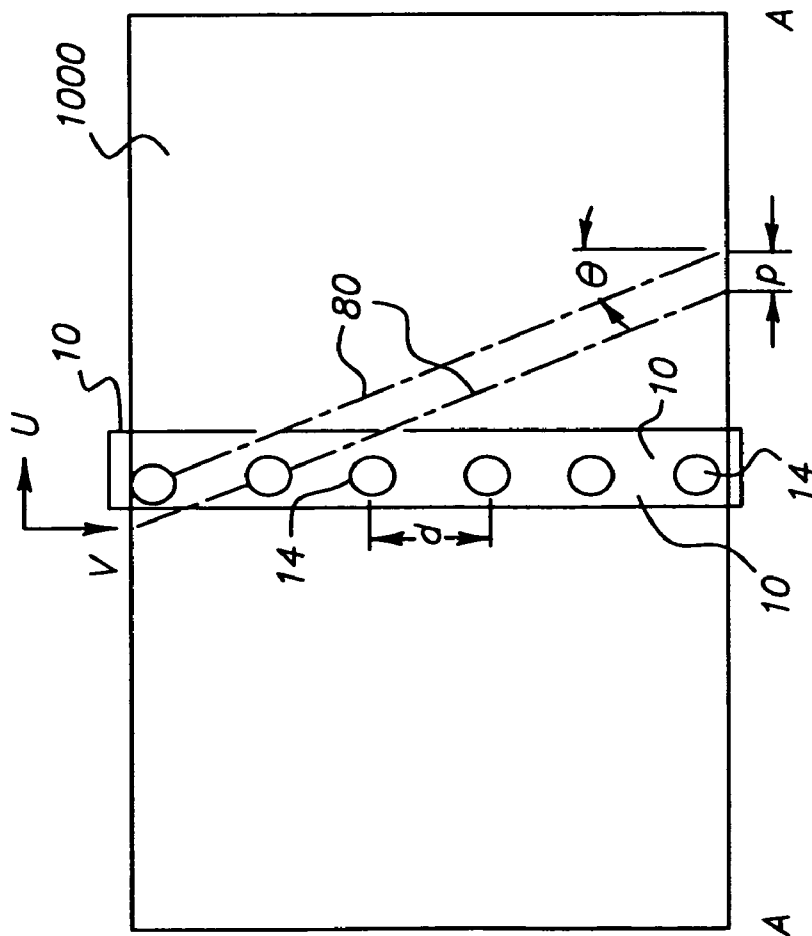


FIG. 7A

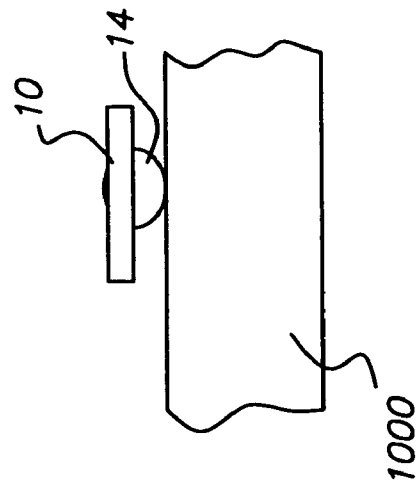


FIG. 7B

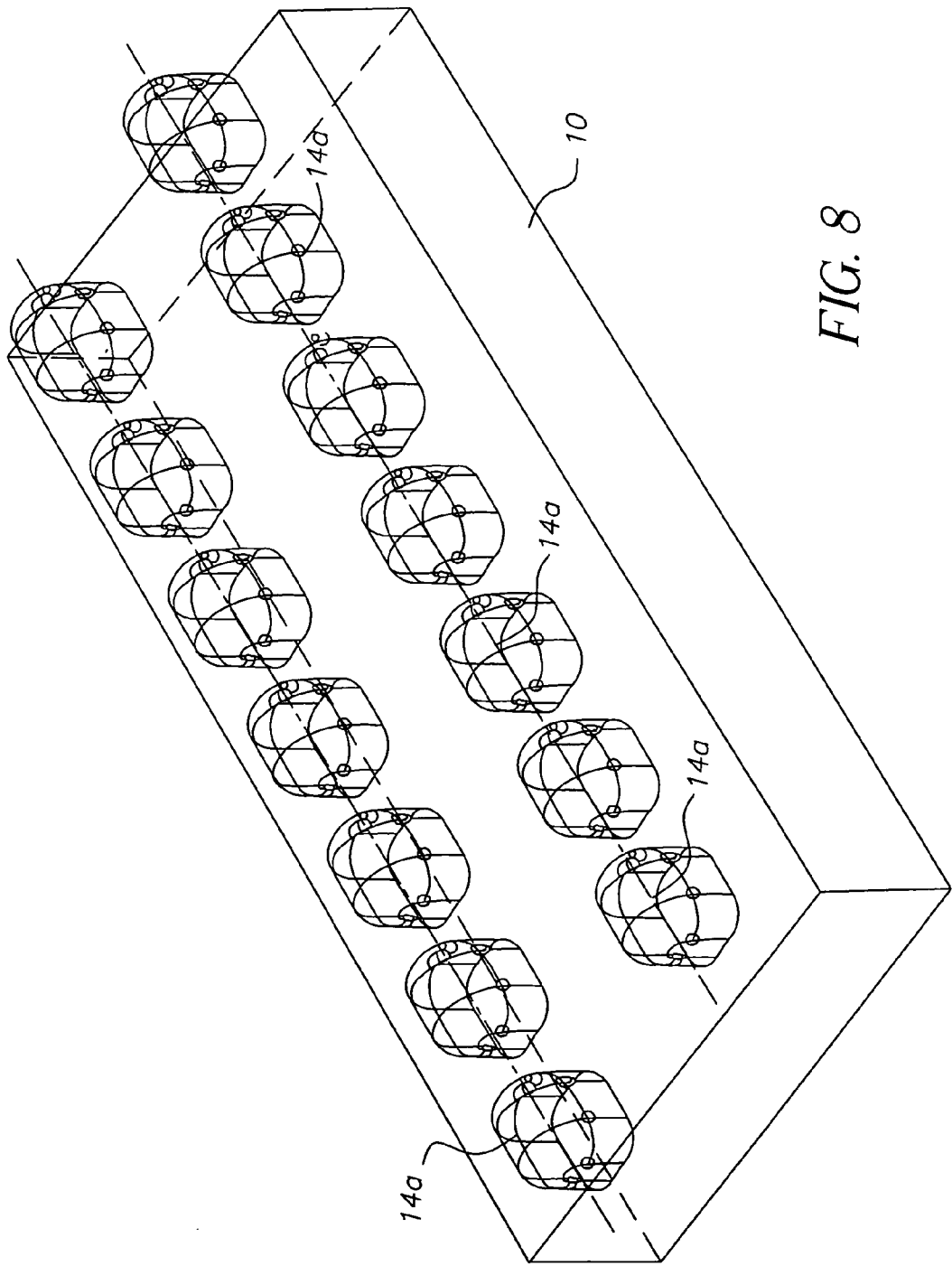


FIG. 8

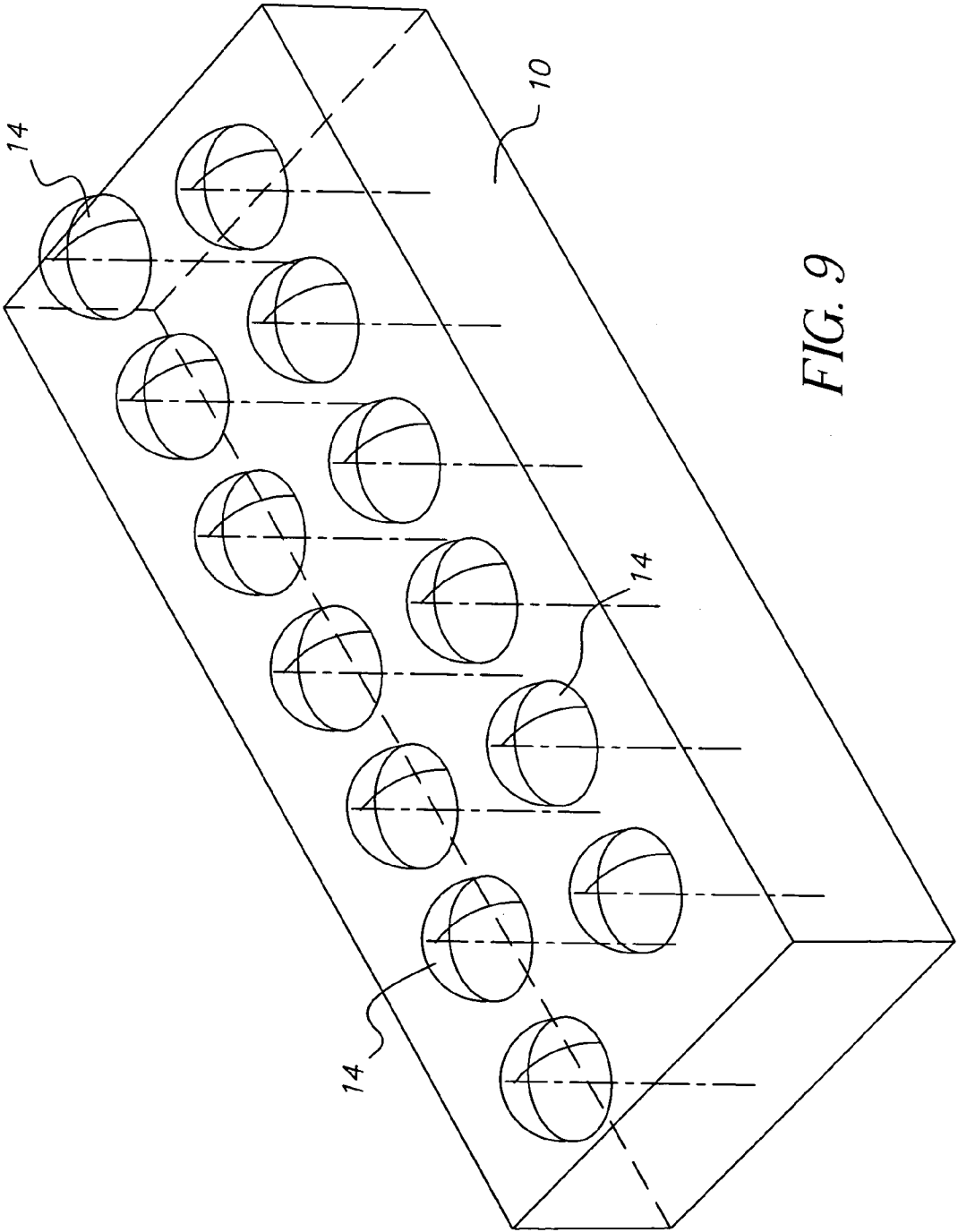


FIG. 9

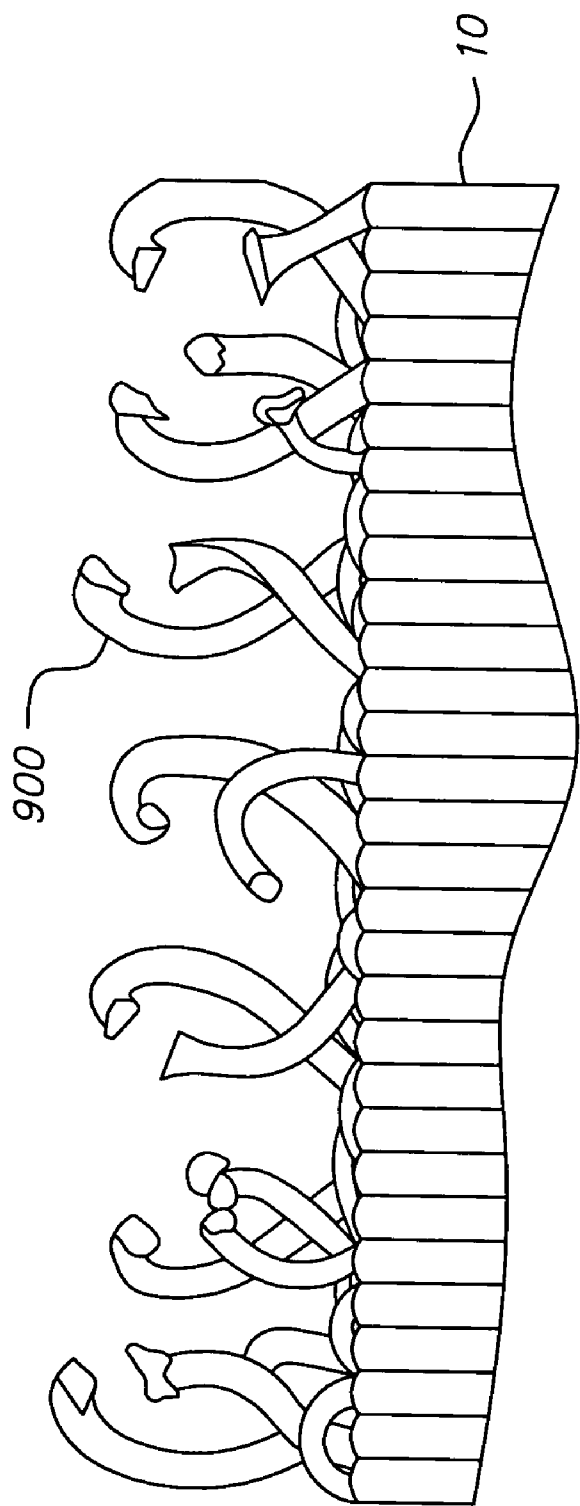


FIG. 10

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IMAGE-FORMING DEVICE HAVING A BELT TYPE PROCESSING MEMBER WITH MICRO-FEATURES

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

The present application is related to the following pending patent application: U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/831,085 filed Apr. 23, 2004, entitled ROLLER CHAIN FOR APPLYING PRESSURE.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to an image-forming device for processing photosensitive media, wherein the photosensitive media includes a plurality of microcapsules that encapsulate imaging material such as coloring material.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Image-forming devices are known in which media having a layer of microcapsules containing a chromogenic material and a photohardenable or photosensitizable composition, and a developer, which may be in the same or a separate layer from the microcapsules, is image-wise exposed. In these devices, the microcapsules are ruptured, and an image is produced by the differential reaction of the chromogenic material and the developer. More specifically, in these image-forming devices, after exposure and rupture of the microcapsules, the ruptured microcapsules release a color-forming agent, whereupon the developer material reacts with the color-forming agent to form an image. The image formed can be viewed through a transparent support or a protective overcoat against a reflective white support as is taught in, for example, U.S. Pat. No. 5,783,353 and U.S. Publication No. 2002/0045121 A1. Typically, the microcapsules will include three sets of microcapsules sensitive respectively to red, green and blue light and containing cyan, magenta and yellow color formers, respectively, as taught in U.S. Pat. No. 4,772,541. Preferably a direct digital transmission imaging technique is employed using a modulated LED print head to expose the microcapsules.

Conventional arrangements for developing the image formed by exposure in these image-forming devices include using spring-loaded balls, micro wheels, micro rollers or rolling pins, and heat from a heat source is applied after this development step to accelerate development.

The photohardenable composition in at least one and possibly all three sets of microcapsules can be sensitized by a photo-initiator such as a cationic dye-borate complex as described in, for example, U.S. Pat. Nos. 4,772,541; 4,772,530; 4,800,149; 4,842,980; 4,865,942; 5,057,393; 5,100,755 and 5,783,353.

The above describes micro-encapsulation technology that combines micro-encapsulation with photo polymerization into a photographic coating to produce a continuous tone, digital imaging member. With regard to the media used in this technology, a substrate is coated with millions of light sensitive microcapsules, which contain either cyan, magenta or yellow image forming dyes (in leuco form). The microcapsule further comprises a monomer and the appropriate cyan, magenta or yellow photo initiator that absorb red, green or blue light respectively. Exposure to light, after the induction period is reached, induces polymerization.

When exposure is made, the photo-initiator absorbs light and initiates a polymerization reaction, converting the inter-

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nal fluid (monomer) into polymer, which binds or traps leucodye from escaping when pressure is applied.

With no exposure, microcapsules remain soft and are easily broken, permitting all of the contained dye to be expelled into a developer containing binder and developed which produces the maximum color available. With increasing exposure, an analog or continuous tone response occurs until the microcapsules are completely hardened, to thereby prevent any dye from escaping when pressure is applied.

Conventionally, as describe above, in order to develop the image, pressure is uniformly applied across the image. As a final fixing step, heat is applied to accelerate color development and to react all un-reacted liquid from the microcapsules. This heating step also serves to assist in the development of available leucodye for improved image stability. Generally, pressure ruptured capsules (unhardened) expel leucodye into the developer matrix.

Small compact low cost printers typically employed micro-wheels or balls backed by springs and operate in a scanning stylus fashion by transversing the media. This allowed for low cost and relatively low spring force due to the small surface area that the ball or micro wheel (typically 2 to 3 mm diameter) contacted on the media. The disadvantage of this method was that the processing pitch required to assure uniform development needs to be (approximately 1 mm for a 3/16" diameter ball) which results in slow processing times for a typical print image format (4x6 inch). Ganging multiple ball stylus or micro wheels adds cost, and increases the possibility of processing failure due to debris caught under a ball surface.

Conventional high speed processing involved line processing utilizing large crushing rollers. To ensure the high pressure, (psi) required, these rollers tended to be large to minimize deflection. However, these large rollers were costly, heavy, and require high spring loading. Also, the extensibility of this method is limited as larger rollers (and spring loads) are required as media size increases.

Recent developments in media design (or the imaging member) as described in co-pending U.S. application Ser. No. 10/687,939 have changed the prior art structure of the imaging member to the point where the aforementioned means of processing may no longer be robust. The use of a substantially non-compressible top clear polymer film layer and a rigid opaque backing layer which serves to contain the image forming layer of conventional media presented a processing position whereby balls, micro wheels or rollers could be used without processing artifacts such as scratch, banding, or dimensional or surface deformation. In addition, the non-compressibility of this prior art structure provided more tolerance to processing conditions. The recent imaging member embodiment as described in the above-mentioned co-pending patent application, replaces the top and bottom structures of the media with highly elastic and compressible materials (gel SOC) (super over coat or top most clear gel comprising layer) and synthetic paper (polyolefin). The media as described in the above-mentioned co-pending application may no longer survive these means of processing in a robust fashion where pressure is applied by a roller or ball. This is due to the fact that in the imaging member described in the co-pending application, the polyolefin paper backing that is used as fiber base substrates (cellulose fiber) present non uniform density, and the high compression forces required for processing in the conventional arrangements may make an "image" of the fiber pattern in the print, thus making the print corrupt.

It would be advantageous to provide a means or method of processing that did not invoke present methods utilizing

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high compression forces, to provide a high quality image by improving the tonal scale development and density minimum formation of the imaging member. As mentioned, the need to provide a means of processing that will facilitate the use of the recently designed imaging member is needed. In addition, a processing means that would use plain paper as a substrate would be highly desired. Further, it would be advantageous to provide a means of processing that is low in cost, is fully extensible, and is mechanically simple and robust.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides for an image-forming device and method that addresses the issues noted above. The image-forming device of the present invention offers the advantages of both types of prior art, i.e., low spring load and fast printing speed.

In a preferred embodiment of the present invention the mechanism for crushing the microcapsules is comprised of a belt or belt-type member with micro-members on a surface thereof, and a platen roller that opposes the belt. The micro-members on the belt can define spherical features that are in direct contact with an emulsion side of the media to introduce pressure which is sufficient to rupture unhardened microcapsules on the media.

The present invention therefore relates to an image-forming device which comprises an imaging member adapted to expose a photosensitive medium to form a latent image on the photosensitive medium, with the photosensitive medium comprising a plurality of microcapsules which encapsulate imaging material; and a processing member adapted to develop the latent image, with the processing member comprising a rotatable belt that includes micro-members on a surface thereof which contact the photosensitive medium during a rotation of the belt to apply a force to a surface of the photosensitive medium. The force is sufficient to release imaging material from selected microcapsules of the plurality of microcapsules.

The present invention also relates to an image forming method that comprises exposing a photosensitive medium comprising a plurality of micro-capsules which encapsulate imaging material to form a latent image; and developing the latent image by contacting a surface of said medium with a rotating belt having micro-members thereon, with the contacting of the micro-members of the rotating belt with the surface of the medium applying a force to the surface of the medium which is sufficient to release imaging material from selected microcapsules of the plurality of microcapsules.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1A schematically shows an image-forming device;

FIG. 1B schematically shows an example of a pressure applying system that can be used in the image-forming device of FIG. 1A;

FIG. 2 schematically shows an image-forming device in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 3 is a front or rear view of a belt or belt-type processing member in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 4 is a detailed view of one embodiment of the belt or belt-type processing member in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 5 is a schematic view of the surface of an embodiment of the belt or belt-type processing member in accordance with the present invention;

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FIG. 6 is a side view of the belt or belt-type processing member of FIG. 3;

FIGS. 7A and 7B illustrate features of the belt or belt-type processing member of the present invention;

FIG. 8 is a schematic view of the surface of a further embodiment of a belt or belt-type processing member in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 9 is a schematic view of the surface of a still further embodiment of a belt or belt-type processing member in accordance with the present invention; and

FIG. 10 is a view of the surface of a still further embodiment of a belt or belt-type processing member of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Referring now to the drawings, wherein like reference numerals represent identical or corresponding parts throughout the several views, FIG. 1A is a schematic view of an image-forming device 15 pertinent to the present invention. Image-forming device 15 could be, for example, a printer that includes an opening 17 that is adapted to receive a cartridge containing photosensitive media. As described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,884,114, the cartridge could be a light tight cartridge in which photosensitive sheets are piled one on top of each other. When inserted into image-forming device 15, a feed mechanism that includes, for example, a feed roller 21a in image-forming device 15, working in combination with a mechanism in the cartridge, cooperate with each other to pull one sheet at a time from the cartridge into image-forming device 15 in a known manner. Although a cartridge type arrangement is shown, the present invention is not limited thereto. It is recognized that other methods of introducing media into the image-forming device such as, for example, individual media feed or roll feed are applicable to the present invention.

Once inside image-forming device 15, photosensitive media travels along media path 19, and is transported by, for example, drive rollers 21 connected to, for example, a driving mechanism such as a motor. The photosensitive media will pass by an imaging member 25 in the form of an imaging head that could include a plurality of light emitting elements (LEDs) that are effective to expose a latent image on the photosensitive media based on image information. After the latent image is formed, the photosensitive media is conveyed past a processing assembly or a development member 27. Processing assembly 27 could be a pressure applicator or pressure assembly, wherein an image such as a color image is formed based on the image information by applying pressure to microcapsules having imaging material encapsulated therein to crush unhardened microcapsules. As discussed above, the pressure could be applied by way of spring-loaded balls, micro wheels, micro rollers, rolling pins, etc.

FIG. 1B schematically illustrates an example of a pressure applicator 270 for processing assembly 27 which can be used in the image-forming device of FIG. 1A. In the example of FIG. 1B, pressure applicator 270 is a crushing roller arrangement that provides a point contact on photosensitive medium 102. More specifically, pressure applicator 270 includes a support 45 that extends along a width-wise direction of photosensitive medium 102. Moveably mounted on support 45 is a crushing roller arrangement 49 that is adapted to move along the length of support 45, i.e., across the width of photosensitive medium 102. Crushing roller arrangement 49 is adapted to contact one side of photosen-

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sitive medium **102**. A beam or roller type member **51** is positioned on an opposite side of photosensitive medium **102** and can be provided on a support or spring member **57**. Beam or roller type member **51** is positioned so as to contact the opposite side of photosensitive medium **102** and is located opposite crushing roller arrangement **49**. Beam or roller type member **51** and crushing roller arrangement **49** when in contact with photosensitive medium **102** on opposite sides provide a point contact on photosensitive medium **102**. Crushing roller arrangement **49** is adapted to move along a width-wise direction of photosensitive material **102** so as to crush unhardened microcapsules and release coloring material. Further examples of pressure applicators or crushing members that can be used in the image-forming device of FIG. 1A are described in U.S. Pat. Nos. 6,483,575 and 6,229,558.

Within the context of the present invention, the imaging material comprises a coloring material (which is used to form images) or material for black and white media. After the formation of the image, the photosensitive media is conveyed past heater **29** (FIG. 1A) for fixing the image on the media. In a through-feed unit, the photosensitive media could thereafter be withdrawn through an exit **32**. As a further option, image-forming device **15** can be a return unit in which the photosensitive media is conveyed or returned back to opening **17**.

As previously discussed, conventional arrangements employ spring loaded micro-wheels or ball processing (point processing) to provide a pressure or crushing force to microcapsules of microencapsulated media. The traditional approach for crushing the microcapsules by way of a crushing force applied by balls, wheels or micro-rollers may provide for processing speeds which are in some instances not as fast as desired due to the fact that the development pitch of these arrangements are small, and processing velocity is limited to reasonable bi-directional travel rates. Furthermore, in the traditional ball-crushing arrangements, debris introduced into the printer can cause the ball or micro-wheel to drag the debris over the media to cause a scratching of the image and, thus, render the print unusable.

In order to provide for a higher throughput device, large rollers, which have a width that covers the width of the media, can be utilized. However, these large rollers tend to require high spring loading and may deflect under load. This could adversely affect the application of pressure on the media.

The present invention overcomes the above-noted drawbacks by providing for an image-forming device **150** as shown in FIG. 2. Image-forming device **150** is similar to image-forming device **15** in FIG. 1A except for the processing member. More specifically, image-forming device **150** can be adapted to accept microencapsulated media through an opening **170**, while a roller **210** can be adapted to convey the media to an imaging member **250**. Imaging member **250** can be an imaging head that includes a plurality of light-emitting elements adapted to expose a latent image on the media based on image information. After the latent image is formed, the media is conveyed passed a processing assembly or a development member **152** in accordance with the present invention. Development member **152** comprises a belt or belt type processing member **10** and a backing member **60**, which can be an opposing platen roller, an opposing beam or a surface having a width that generally matches the width of the media. Belt **10** comprises micro-members **14** thereon that are adapted to contact microencapsulated photosensitive medium **1000** when it travels between belt **10** and backing member **60**. More specifically,

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belt **10** includes a surface or outer surface that comprises a plurality of micro-members **14** which contact the surface of media **1000** as belt **10** is rotated. Micro-members **10** can define spherical features or can be in the form of hook-like or loop-like members provided on the exterior surface of belt **10**.

FIG. 3 is a view of the front or rear of belt **10** relative to media **1000** wherein media **1000** is traveling into or from the paper. As illustrated in FIG. 3, belt **10** is preferably an endless belt that is wrapped around opposing pulleys **20**. A known drive member such as a motor can be used to rotate pulleys **20** as shown by the arrows **20a**, **20b** to cause a rotation of belt **10** in direction **5000**. As shown in FIG. 2, the rotation direction **5000** of belt **10** is transverse to the direction of travel **6000** of media **1000** in image-forming device **150**.

As further illustrated in FIG. 3, a spring-loaded plate **40** urged by springs **30** can be provided on a surface of belt **10**. Preferably, spring-loaded plate **40** is provided within endless belt **10** and on a portion of belt **10** that faces media **1000** to provide a pressure on belt **10** that is applied to media **1000**.

For processing media **1000**, belt **10** is rotated in direction **5000** or a direction opposite to direction **5000**, such that micro-members **14** contact media **1000** with a rotational force that is sufficient to apply a shear-like force and/or a compressional force onto the top surface of media **1000**. With this arrangement, the rotational force applied by micro-members **14** is essentially converted to a compressive or pressure force onto media **1000**, which is sufficient to rupture selected unhardened microcapsules.

FIG. 4 is a detailed view of a section of belt **10** having micro-members **14** thereon. As shown, belt **10** is located such that the micro-members **14** contact a surface of media **1000**. Therefore, when belt **10** is rotated as described above, the micro-members **14** apply a force on the media that is sufficient to rupture unhardened microcapsules on media **1000**. As also shown in FIG. 4, micro-members **14** could be in the form of spherical members such as semi-circles. Of course, the present invention is not limited to the spherical members being in the form of semi-circles provided directly on the surface of belt **10**. For example, as shown in FIG. 5, the micro-members could be designed to rise above a surface of belt **10**. More specifically, micro-members **14a** as shown in FIG. 5 include a base section **14c** and a semicircular member **14d** that can be made of any smooth surface and can take any shape. With the arrangement of FIG. 5 in which the semicircular member **14d** is raised from the belt surface, it is not necessary to locate belt **10** as close to the surface of media **1000** as in the embodiment of FIG. 4.

FIG. 6 is a side view of a portion of the image-forming device in accordance with the present invention and illustrates belt **10** with respect to media **1000**. As shown, media **1000** travels in direction **6000** while belt **10** is rotated in direction **5000** (FIG. 3) which would be a direction in and out of the paper in FIG. 6 and is transverse to direction **6000**. Spring loaded plate **40** with springs **30** urge micro-members **14** into contact with media **1000** such that nips are essentially formed between each of micro-members **14** and backing member **60** for the passage of media **1000** therebetween.

Referring back to FIG. 3 where belt **10** is shown as moving from left to right, while media **1000** is moving out of the plane and perpendicular to the belt moving direction, belt **10** preferably defines a width between pulleys **20a**, **20b** that is at least greater than a width of media **1000**. Therefore, rotation of belt **10** having micro-members **14** thereon is effective to crush all the unhardened microcapsules and

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release imaging material to form an image. The imaging material that is released from the microcapsules comprises a coloring material that is used to form the image or material for black and white media. After formation of the image, the photosensitive media is conveyed pass heater **290** for fixing the image on the media. In a through-feed unit, the photosensitive media could thereafter be withdrawn through an exit **320**. As a further option, image-forming device **150** can be a return unit in which the photosensitive media is conveyed to or returned back to opening **170**.

A further feature of the present invention will be described with reference to FIGS. **7A** and **7B**. FIG. **7A** shows a top view of the present invention, where belt **10** is moving downward at a linear velocity of v , and media **1000** is moving right at a linear velocity of u . Lines **80** represent centerlines of a processing band produced by the pressure from two consecutive micro-members **14**. Angle θ as shown in FIG. **7A** can be adjusted by adjusting a ratio of u to v . For example, line **80** is vertical when the media speed u is zero.

An advantage of the present invention is related to the fact that the whole imaging area is processed under the micro-members **14** multiple times to ensure color development. Furthermore, as shown in FIG. **7A**, a pitch p (the distance between the centerlines **80** of two consecutive processing bands), can be adjusted by adjusting the spacing of the micro-members **14**, as well as the velocities of the belt **10** and the media **1000**. In fact, as illustrated by the following equation (1), it can be shown that

$$p = \frac{u}{v} d \quad (1)$$

where p is the pitch, u and v are the belt speed (vertical) and media speed (horizontal to the right), respectively, and d is the distance between the centers of two consecutive micro-members **14**. In order to achieve a sufficiently high color density D_{max} , the pitch value should be much smaller than a characteristic length (radius in the case of sphere) of the micro-members **14**. In the present invention, in order to achieve the desired small pitch value, one simply needs to reduce media speed u , or the distance d between the consecutive micro-features. Of course, the distance d cannot be smaller than the diameter of the sphere, however the media speed u can be reduced to a needed value to achieve the desired pitch.

As described above, the micro-members **14** can be in various shapes, can vary in spacing and can vary in configuration. FIG. **7B** is a side view of FIG. **7A** and show micro-members **14** as a spherical or semi-circular members. Also, as shown in FIG. **7A**, the micro-members can be in a single row on belt **10**. However, the present member is not limited to such an arrangement. FIGS. **8** and **9** are alternative embodiments of the inventions where two rows of micro-members **14**, **14a** are shown.

Further, instead of a spherical member, micro-members **14**, **14a** on the surface of belt **10** can be in the form of loop and hooks. FIG. **10** illustrates one embodiment of a loop and hook configuration **900** provided on the surface of belt **10**. Although loop and hook configuration **900** is shown as broken loops, the present invention is not limited thereto. As an alternative, the loops of the loop and hook configuration can be unbroken loops. Further, the loops and hooks can be made of a plastic or resilient material and can be provided on the outer surface of belt **10** in a random or predetermined pattern with respect to location and height.

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Loop and hook configuration **900** functions like micro-members **14**, **14a** in that a rotation of belt **10** causes loop and hook configuration **900** to contact the media while being rotated. This causes a force on the media that is sufficient to rupture the non-hardened microcapsules to release coloring material.

It is noted that belt **10** having spherical members **14**, **14a**, or belt **10** having loop and hook configuration **900** can be compliant in nature in order to compensate for any non-uniform surfaces on the media, and can be self-correcting for media thickness variations. It is also noted that belt **10** can be rotated at various velocities in accordance with design considerations, however, faster velocities provide for a higher probability of more micro-members striking the microcapsules on the media, which improves development.

The arrangement of the present invention is advantageous for processing media such as disclosed in co-pending application U.S. Ser. No. 10/687,939, since a sufficient force to rupture the capsules is created. The present invention also permits the use of a low cost base media since the processing can be restricted to the microcapsules and any deformation or patterning caused by density differences in the support sheet and read out in the development of the media due to the resulting differential pressures is of no consequence. That is, in a feature of the present invention, rotating belt **10** with micro-members **14**, **14a** or **900** thereon permits the restriction of processing development to the image forming layer of media **1000**, while leaving both the top most clear gel comprising layer intact and without scratches. Further, belt **10** with micro-members **14**, **14a** or **900** thereon does not invade the bottom-most backing layer of media **1000** and thus, avoids pattern readout of low-cost media supports.

The invention has been described in detail with particular reference to certain preferred embodiments thereof, but it will be understood that variations and modifications can be effected within the spirit and scope of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. An image-forming device comprising:

an imaging member that exposes a photosensitive medium to form a latent image on the photosensitive medium, the photosensitive medium comprising a plurality of microcapsules which encapsulate imaging material; and

a processing member that develops the latent image, said processing member comprising a rotatable belt that includes micro-members on a surface thereof which contact the photosensitive medium during a rotation of the belt to apply a force to a surface of the photosensitive medium, said force being sufficient to release imaging material from selected microcapsules of said plurality of microcapsules.

2. An image-forming device according to claim 1, wherein said micro-members are a plurality of spherical members provided on the surface of the belt.

3. An image-forming device according to claim 1, wherein said micro-members are a plurality of hook and loop members which extend from an outer surface of said belt.

4. An image-forming device according to claim 1, further comprising a backing member positioned so as oppose said belt, wherein said media passes between said belt and said backing member.

5. An image-forming device according to claim 4, wherein said backing member is an opposing platen roller.

6. An image-forming device according to claim 1, wherein said belt is an endless belt that extends around two opposing pulleys.

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7. An image-forming device according to claim 6, further comprising a spring member that urges a surface of said belt which opposes the media in a direction toward the media.

8. An image-forming device according to claim 6, wherein said belt is rotated in a first direction around the opposing pulleys, said first direction being transverse to a direction of travel of the media in said image-forming device.

9. An image forming method comprising:

exposing a photosensitive medium comprising a plurality of micro-capsules which encapsulate imaging material to form a latent image; and

developing the latent image by contacting a surface of said medium with a rotating belt having micro-members thereon, said contacting of the micro-members of

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the rotating belt with the surface of the medium applying a force to the surface of the medium which is sufficient to release imaging material from selected microcapsules of the plurality of microcapsules.

10. An image forming method according to claim 9, wherein said micro-members comprise a plurality of hook and loop members located on a surface of said belt.

11. An image forming method according to claim 9, wherein said micro-members comprise a plurality of spherical members located on a surface of said belt.

12. An image forming method according to claim 9, wherein during said developing step, the medium is conveyed between the rotating belt and a backing member.

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